

Tommy by the Way

A Brief Sketch

by

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Twilight. A sunken road behind the forward trenches. Above the four foot bank may be seen the brief stems of riven trees standing gaunt against the last green daylight. They strike the note of utter desolation.

(A Tommy enters in fighting kit. He is tired, and has a guilty, haunted look, he sits down wearily and takes off his shrapnel helmet)

Tommy

Oh my Gawd... (He remains with his head in his hands in a torpor of despair. But it is not for long; suddenly he looks up) Why not?!...I will...it's easy (he jumps up, draws his bayonet and feels the point musingly. he feels his left arm, pinching up fingers full of muscle, looking for a fleshy part in which to make a self-inflicted wound. His hand moves up to his shoulder and it occurs to him that just under the collar bone would be a good spot. (Of course it would be a very bad spot really, but Tommy does not know that) he puts the point of the bayonet there, but his hand refuses to give the necessary push. He hesitates, looks round, picks up his rifle and fixes the bayonet)

(Then you realise that, amongst the enshrouding shadows is standing a woman, for she now uncovers her face. tall she is, mysterious you might say, for she is so garbed that her appearance suggests neither period nor age. without further movement she stands watching the Unhappy Warrior)

(He lodges the butt of his rifle against some obstacle and grasps the stock near the bayonet with both hands. With the point at his shoulder he moves to throw his weight upon it)

(The woman takes a sudden step forward and the soldier lets fall the rifle and turns guiltily towards her. They stand looking at one another)

Tommy (sheepishly) Bon Jour madame!

(The woman neither speaks nor moves)

Il fait chaud...beaucoup, n'est-ce pas? Oui? (he tries to laugh jauntily. then angrily at her continued silence) oh, all right, if yer don't comprenny yer own blarsted lingo! 'op off, tout suite D'yer 'ear?

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...'op it..gor blimey, why don't you learn a decent Christian language.

Woman

You poor boy!

Tommy

'ow , yer can speak english, can yer! That's just like you blarsted foreigners; learns our language and then looks down on us because we can't parlez-vous back. 'spose yer only learnt it so's yer could spy. That's wot you are, dirty lot o' spies. But you don't come spyin' on me! I ain't nothin' ter do with you! Oh, my gawd, what the 'ell did I come to this country for?

(Thoroughly wrought up as he is, he breaks down utterly and blubbers. the woman is beside him in a minute, supporting him, and gradually his head sinks back)

Woman

You're tired, terribly tired. A little sleep will do you good (She undoes the top button of his tunic. The movement rouses him)

Tommy

'Ere what yer playin' at. thought I was asleep, did yer? Was goin' ter see if I 'ad any despatches on me, I suppose. Well, I ain't, see! but I ain't goin' to 'ave you runnin' through me pickets. I've got eight francs on me, I 'ave, and you'd like 'em, wouldn't yer? I know yer! I seen your sort at the 'staminets.

Woman

Eight franks. they wouldn't be much use to me. I possess far, far more

than that.

Tommy

And I can well believe it. The profits you people make out of us is somethink wicked. 'ere, give me that rifle.

(The woman has been holding it)

I'm off

Woman

Have you finished cleaning it?

Tommy

What!

Woman

Were'nt you cleaning it just now?

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Tommy

Did it look as though I were cleanin' of it?

Woman

You had your back to me.

Tommy

Ever see a bloke clean 'is rifle with the bayonet on?

Woman

I'm only a woman, you know?

Tommy

What's it got ter do with you, any'ow?

Woman

More than you think.

Tommy

'Ow 'as it? Then if it's important for yu ter know, I'll bloomin' well tell yer. I'm fed up! i was goin' ter give meself a blighty touch.

Woman

A self inflicted wound. Yes, I knew that.

Tommy

Then what yer want to ask for?

Woman

Because I wanted to hear you confess it.

Tommy

'Ow did yer? well, if yer think yer goin' to get me shot at dawn every day for a week, yer bloomin' well mistaken. Cos yer 'aven't got no witnesses, see!

Woman

Why are so you fed up?

tommy

Wouldn't you be fed u if you'd gorn through what I 'ave? It's been just blinkin' 'ell for the last few weeks. Ever 'eard a shell burst?

Woman

Many thousands.

Tommy

Well, I've 'eard millions! millions! I tell yer, and that ain't no exaggeration. I've been in trenches what's been blown ter pieces all about me, and me pals all killed and wounded.

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Woman

Your pals all killed and wounded! and now you're running away. A...a....

Tommy

Go on, say it! A coward!

Woman

Oh no, I wasn't going to say a coward. I was going to say a son of some poor mother in England who looks up to you as her hero.

Tommy

'Ere, 'ere , come off that. i don't want none of your 'ero stuff thrown at me. I'm just an ordinary bloke, I am. I never wanted ter be no 'ero. I was

earning me 25 bob a week before this blarsted war came on. A darned good job I got in them days.

Woman

And yet you gave it up

Tommy

Cos why! Cos my girl said if I didn't chuck my job and - and -

Woman

And be a man?

Tommy

She'd chuck me

Woman

That was the spirit of the women of England speaking! And so you listened to her and joined up!

Tommy

Well, I 'ad to, 'adn't i? I wasn't goin' to 'ave her callin' me a coward! easy enough for 'er to jaw. She 'adn't got er go through it. Didn't 'alf fancy 'erself walkin' on me arm and lookin' at other girls whose blokes wasn't in khaki.

Woman

And when you left for France were there no tears?

Tommy

Well, she laughed so as I could see she was merry and bright, but I sort of noticed she kept 'er 'ead down. and when the trained moved off she ewaved "er 'anderkerchief and I snatched it fer fun like, and ... (seriously) lor' lummy, it weren't 'alf wet.

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Woman

And yet you say she didn't have to go through it

Tommy

Oh - well... (cheerfully) I've got 'er 'anderkerchief 'ere (pulls it out) it's dry now.

Woman

But her eyes are not. And when you go back to her and say 'I ran away' do you think she'll walk with dry eyes and a smiling face down that little street in Islington.

Tommy

'Ow chuck it (with sudden surprise) 'ere, Islington. I never told you she lives at Islington.

Woman

But I knew it, didn't it?

Tommy

You don't come from Islington?

Woman

I come from north, south, east, and west

Tommy

'Ere, but 'onest, do you know 'er?

Woman

I know every mother, wife, sister and sweetheart.

Tommy

Lor' lummy, you are a rummun! Who are yer?

Woman

I've been waiting for you to ask me that. I am a the spirit of the women of England.

Tommy

The spirit -

Woman

Of the women of England. I was when England first was. And down through all the historied years .

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I have watched and waited whilst my men made England what she is

Tommy

'Ere but a spirit - ...that's what...Blimey!

Woman

I know exactly. You're wondering if it's shell shock. It seems so strange, doesn't it, to see me talking to you like...like your girl might. Yet I've often talked to you before.

Tommy

You 'ave

Woman

There was that time when you had to join up or be chucked. Of course you didn't know it was I. Then each time letters come from home I've been with you. And you remember that night when they were shelling the broken battered trench you had all taken so splendidly in the morning. You were sitting in a shell hole with...

Tommy

With ole Bill Hester. We was waiting for the counter-attack. Gawd, wasn't they just crumin' the stuff about?

Woman

As you sat there, you pulled a crumpled picture out of your pocket and though you hadn't been talking about it before, you just said 'that's 'er'.

Tommy

And old Bill give me a start and said 'lummy! I were thinkin' of my missus too'

Woman

Yes, I was with you both that night, nerving you, bidding you both be strong.

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Tommy

Old Bill bagged nine of 'em before they did 'im in.

Woman

You did well that night too.

Tommy

(modestly) Oh, I ... I nicked a few of 'em. (excitedly) But we 'eld that

blinkin' streak o' mud, didn't we? They never retook a yard of it.

Woman

Yes, the spirit of England was proud of her men.

Tommy

We was as cocky as a lot o' sparrers when we come out (seriously) but, by gawd, you should have seen them as didn't come out no more.

Woman

I saw them. I am with every man in his hour of pain, and when his eyes are closed at last to war; wife, mother, sweetheart hear my voice and clutch at comfort, saying with me 'he died magnificently'. Oh, if you men would only be sure of the spirit of the women of England, there would never be sad faces when you think of home. They are so sure of you, so generous of all they hold most dear, so certain that, come what may, their men will never fail them.

Tommy

That's all very well, but they don't know what war is. There ain't no chance for a man at all. It's all machinery and shrapnel and high explosive. What I want to know is why the 'ell'.... (feeling he is talking to a lady)... s'pose I didn't oughter says that.

Woman

Oh yes, talk to me just like you'd talk to 'er'.

Tommy

Well, why the 'ell should we be doin' it alt all.

Woman

If a man insulted your girl, what would you do?

Tommy

(indignant) Search me! ...What d'yer think i'd do (business of having scrap) Not 'arf I wouldn't

Woman

Do you remember once when that really did happen?

Tommy

(Jauntily) It's happened once or twice

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Woman

Yes, but on this particular occasion the man hit you a bit hard and you chucked it up.

Tommy

It's a lie! I've never.... who told yer that?!

Woman

I saw it myself

Tommy

I tell yer it's a lie!

Woman

Oh no, it's not. It happened just now. When....when you were cleaning your rifle.

Tommy

Oh come, but that...I ain't fighting for me girl.

Woman

You're fighting for England. England's a woman, you know. England is just every man's girl.

Tommy

Oh, damn England

Woman

Certainly, if you like. You've probably 'damned' your girl often enough, but it doesn't make you love her any the less. That's what our enemies could never understand. They thought because we went about and 'damned' our England, we wouldn't fight for her. But we did.

Tommy

Rather. There ain't no foreigners going to come it over us.

Woman

Unless they hit a bit too hard and

Tommy

(Remembering) Yus, you've got me all right there, (full of bitter abuse for himself) gawd, and you said their men never failed 'em.

Woman

Oh, you hadn't failed us then. It was your hour of agony in the garden.

Tommy

I was goin' to do it! If you hadn't just...I'd a done it!

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Woman

I wonder. If you can hear my voice now, I don't think you would have failed us then.

Tommy

What am I to do?

Woman

Go back the way you came.

Tommy

But I can't. I ran away

Woman

No, you only lost direction. Anyone can lose direction in the dark, and yours was a very dark hour.

Tommy

I can't go back. I could never forget I've been a coward.

Woman

I've known those who thought they were cowards once and have afterwards shown themselves such men that they have won the cross.

Tommy

Oh, I don't want none of yer V.C's. Any man what's been through it knows the rot of that sort o' thing. Pictures in the papers, and girls kissin' yer!

Woman

That's only one side of it. think of all your pals who have fallen and now lie sleeping in a corner of the field the won, with forests of crosses standing sentinel above them. Wouldn't it be worthwhile to wear a cross in memory

of the splendid dead.

Tommy

(Awe-struck at the idea) in memory...that would be...

Woman

Yes, wouldn't it (she makes passes with her hands)

(sleep begins to overcome the Tommy)

Tommy

Phew ! I'm sleepy....in memory...ole Bill....lots of 'em.... (He has settled down to sleep)

Woman

(Holding his rifle like a sentry) Sleep and gather strength from me, the Spirit of the Women of England, who has kept vigil throughout all time. Never in any season has my nation's sword been drawn but I have been

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there too. behind the path of the invader I have wept over desolate hearths and I have stood behind defeat to nerve the arm to victory. I have sailed in oaken ships to the outposts of the world and in ships of steel have I kept the gates of commerce clear. Little by little England has given place to Empire and I girdle the great round world across the seven seas. There is no land but knows me, I have strengthened the arm of the pioneer when he hewed his way through adventurous forests and harnessed the forces of nature to his will in each wild continent. Time was when I could be none other than a force behind my men, but in these later days I have a further part. Now it is also given to me to work with my hands in field and factory, in camp and hospital, and bear the physical burden of each day. Oh, women of England and of our empire in this your greatest hour look upon me who am but a reflection of yourselves, no little thing am I, but life and love, urging, guiding, compelling, seldom with glamour, but always in great moments of trial and sorrow and so, until the world's end, a force unconquerable.

(The tommy stretches himself and wakes and looks around)

Tommy

Blimey, been asleep 'ave I... 'ello, you still 'ere

Woman

Yes, I've been looking after your rifle. You were cleaning it when you fell asleep.

Tommy

(Hotly) Yes! I was cleanin' it! Don't you go for to say I wasn't!

Woman

You still think I want to get you a court martial.

Tommy

I dunno. I s'pose not...(laughing queerly) I've 'ad an awful rummy dream about you. You wouldn't 'alf laugh if I told you. strite, I dreamt you was...never mind. but it weren't 'alf rummy. Well, I must 'op it.

Woman

You don't still think I'm a spy.

Tommy

Oh, I was a bit narked then. 'Sides...seems sort o' sloppy I know, but....

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Woman

Well?

Tommy

You sort o' remind me of my girl...that's why i'm going to let you into a secret. To-night there's goin' to be the biggest scrap you ever 'eard of. Them 'Uns is just goin' to get it in the neck, and I'm goin' to be one of those what gives 'em 'ell! so long.

(He goes off singing some popular song of the moment)

(The woman remains centre, her arms extended. Finally she sinks down as though in prayer and still you hear the song of the Tommy going forward)

Curtain